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Yankee gets OK to boost power

Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant, after a wait of more than two years, received federal approval Thursday to boost its power production by 20 percent.

Entergy Nuclear, owner of the plant, said it would start the weeks-long process of increasing production and testing in the next couple days.

The approval was expected after the plant passed an important regulatory hurdle in December. The Vernon reactor will eventually produce 640 megawatts, an increase of 110 megawatts.

Currently, Vermont Yankee provides one-third of the state's electricity. It sells half of its production out of state.

Only a small portion of the new power will be used by Vermont ratepayers: The Vermont Electric Cooperative will buy 10 megawatts of the new power for four years, according to state regulators.

Both Central Vermont Public Service and Green Mountain Power reiterated earlier statements saying their power portfolios were filled for the foreseeable future and didn't need the additional power.

The power, which will be sold into the regional power grid, is expected to ease some regional demand, according to Central Vermont's spokesman Stephen Costello. There might be an indirect benefit by the extra power reducing market prices, he said.

The NRC decision was hailed by Entergy. Company spokesman Robert Williams said the decision means less pollution for New England.

"It will serve consumers throughout the region and will further reduce the need for burning fossil fuels to generate electricity," he said Thursday.

Williams said the company will start the process gradually, with testing along the way to ensure safety.

The NRC also did a little back-patting Thursday for its two years of work.

"We've taken great care to identify and address technical concerns involved with safely operating the plant at increased power," said Jim Dyer, director of the NRC's Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation, in a prepared statement.

The NRC said the proposal had received 11,000 staff hours of review, with a special state-requested inspection adding another 900 hours of scrutiny.

The decision drew qualified support from the state's two U.S. senators, who noted that the decision was made before all the safety issues had been resolved.

"We expect the NRC to closely monitor this uprate to ensure the increased power generation does not result in safety or reliability problems," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt, in a joint statement.

"As a delegation, we intend to continue to use our oversight authority to ensure the NRC follows through in these areas," the senators said.

Both Jeffords and Leahy noted that the state's safety concerns filed with the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board remain unresolved.

"We remain concerned that the ASLB has not set a hearing schedule yet, and urge the NRC to do so immediately," they said.

Jeffords is the ranking member of the Senate committee overseeing the NRC.

The NRC's decision Thursday was denounced by nuclear critics as putting too much new radiation into the atmosphere and putting the public at risk with what they claimed was an experimental technology in many ways.

And Vermont regulators, who had largely supported the power increase, announced they had a new agreement with Entergy — worked out last month — that they say gives ratepayers more protection since it believes the power boost could create some reliability problems down the road.

David O'Brien, commissioner of the Department of Public Service, said Yankee's steam dryer, a key component that has proved problematic

in every similar nuclear reactor undergoing a similar power boost, could make Vermont Yankee unreliable.

O'Brien said an earlier memorandum didn't provide adequate protection for ratepayers, and he said the new agreement would.

If Vermont Yankee becomes unreliable and finds it has to shut down for costly repairs, the financial burden could fall on Vermont ratepayers because of the higher costs of replacing that power, he said.

O'Brien said \$20 million in revenue-sharing funds, negotiated between Entergy and the state more than two years ago, would go into the state's Clean Energy Fund, which can be used to fund alternative energy projects.

The NRC's final approval Thursday still leaves two regulatory loose ends: the Public Service Board, which granted Entergy a certificate of public good on March 15, 2004, still hasn't given its final approval to the project.

Judith Whitney, a spokeswoman for the board, said a final order was being prepared and would be released Friday.

And the federal Atomic Safety Licensing Board hasn't ruled on safety concerns.

Two anti-nuclear groups cried foul and said the state was changing its permit without due process and a public hearing.

The PSB had ordered a special engineering inspection of the plant to reassure critics that the 33-year-old reactor could withstand the additional pressures of the power boost.

"It's bizarre, it's symptomatic that they allow this increase before the final safety rulings have been made," said Ed Anthes of Nuclear Free Vermont.

Anthes said it was "astounding" that the Public Service Board finally said Thursday it would issue its final order on the case, only after Entergy announced it would start the uprate process Saturday.

Raymond Shadis of the New England Coalition, said the NRC's 11,000 hours of review represented "11,000 hours of pencil-sharpening" and

of appeasing the nuclear industry.

Shadis pointed out that the uprate will mean the plant will release up to 20 percent more radiation into the atmosphere in Vernon. State and federal have acknowledged the increase, but said it was still within safety standards.

"This is poison power left over from the Eisenhower era," Shadis said.

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